

### Selena ¡Siempre Selena!

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Talent, determination, romance, beauty — Selena Quintanilla Perez had it all. And family and community support, international recognition, and commercial success. Of course, the film had to simplify the presentation of her life, but what first interested me about SELENA was how the story varied from the norms of the Hollywood biopic. [1][[open notes in new window](#)] Traditionally, family is marginal or nonexistent in the screen version of a real life. Where origins and ethnicity are important, the script usually quickly erases or has the main character overcome them as s!he begins to apprentice in the struggle for success. Or sometimes the family hinders the hero and growth comes from putting family behind.

But in SELENA family and ethnicity are central to the singer's entire career. It's easy to see why Selena's father, Abraham Quintanilla, Jr., chose to make a deal with director Gregory Nava for this picture because Nava's previous films are so family-centered (EL NORTE, MI FAMILIA/MY FAMILY). Not only did the star spend most of her life on the road traveling with the family musical act, but when married, Selena and her husband — who played lead guitar in the band — lived next door to her parents. Selena didn't leave home to become a success. She took home with her literally in the family's tour buses.

The family theme anchors the SELENA narrative. And thus the film exudes positive "family values." Indeed SELENA is a (rare) classic example of the "positive image" film. It depicts Selena as a thoroughly admirable human being. And the most compelling part focuses on the Oedipal father-daughter relationship. Abraham (Edward James Olmos) is the classic stage father, living out his frustrated dreams of making it in the music world of by pushing his own children forward. Youngest daughter Selena exhibits a "natural" talent and becomes the focus of Dad's attention. She flourishes under his attention and tutelage, but inevitably she chaffs at his assertion of patriarchal authority over her sexy stage costumes and her budding romance with the band's guitarist.

What's particularly compelling in this story is the way the film depicts of Dad not just as comically wrong (a sitcom staple) but aslo showing him as forgiving and

willing to moderate his temper after an outburst. Thus the film implies that Selena gets her strength as a performer and young woman from imitating Dad's stubborn determination. As often in real life, separation is easier for the daughter than for the father. In this she is aided by her brother and sister, and especially her mother, who is always supportive and understanding, adapting to Dad's initiatives, impulses, and orders, and guiding the kids through the situation.

If the film provides this image of family life as a myth for the audience, it is a comforting myth, but one which also contains its own revealing truth. In her transformation into adult heterosexuality, Selena (played as an adult by Jennifer Lopez) also ends up transcending her mother's need for a "strong man." Selena is the initiator in her romance, proposing the first date and eventually eloping into marriage. Husband Chris (Jon Seda) is the ultimate handsome, quiet, "nice guy," accepting a woman with a mission and a career. Here is the conservative middle class Latina fantasy: Daddy's girl becomes a self-reliant, forceful career woman with a man who will become a supportive husband and good father.

SELENA's personal narrative tightly interweaves with its professional one, the American success story, which also entwines with the ethnic drama. In the opening, the film flashes back from Selena's triumph at the Astrodome a month before her murder (discretely omitting that the occasion was an annual cattle show and rodeo) cutting to her father's youthful aspiration singing doo-wop. Rejected because of both Anglo racism and Mexican American audience's dedication to traditional Tex-Mex dance music, Abraham's frustrated dreams re-emerge twenty years later after his family has assimilated into the Anglo world of industrial Lake Jackson, Texas, where he worked as a shipping clerk for Dow Chemical. Seeing his daughter's talent, he trains the kids, then in a reawakening of ethnicity opens a Mexican restaurant where the kids perform. When that dream goes bust and the Quintanillas have to sell the restaurant, the family moves back to Corpus Christi, living with relatives, and thus become reinserted in the Tejano community.

SELENA indicates that the family had already achieved "middle class" status and successful assimilation into the Anglo Texas mainstream. The film sketches this with scenes of blond neighbors in the childhood segment. From then on the film shows the family's and especially Selena's new struggle for status, for financial success, and for professional recognition on the changing terrain of ethnicity. The film implies that this new form of assimilation is more authentic. As a musician, Selena had to overcome many barriers: the inferior position of women in the music scene, the audience's prejudice against innovation, and the limited size of the Tejano audience. The film shows the family musicians solving these problems by individual determination, appealing to the youth in the audience, and crossover beyond a regional and ethnic audience.

## TEJANO MUSIC

The context of Selena's career is the evolving world of Tejano music. Tejano (Texas Mexican) music itself embodies assimilation and change. It originates in the fusion of Spanish-based local music with immigrant-imported German polka rhythms and instruments in 19th century Northern Mexico and Texas. Norteño

(encompassing both sides of the border region) expanded from a folk base to a vernacular (commercial regional ethnic) phenomenon in the early 20th century with recordings and radio. Its most famous traditional star, Lydia Mendoza, proclaimed the "singer of the poor" during the Depression, gained fame not only from live performances of love ballads, but also from the mechanical reproduction of her sound, first on live radio, then on records and broadcasting the recordings on radio which freely crosses the Rio Grande.

Les Blank's documentary CHULAS FRONTERAS (1976) places Tejano music within a distinct culture of food, music, dance, and socializing.[2] The film gives a good sense of corridos, ballads which often describe the history of Tejano people—originally Mexican farmers and peasants who were incorporated into Texas through the imperial expansion of the U.S. during the Mexican American War and driven off their land and disenfranchised by Anglos.[3] Subsequent new arrivals from Mexico were typically pushed into the migrant agricultural labor force, where they ranged from California to the Northwest, to Colorado, and up the Mississippi River valley as far as Minnesota in search of seasonal work while returning to South Texas off season. Like African American blues, in this music themes and images of travel echo the actual life of the labor force. And in this context, the songs of love, separation, and yearning have a shadow background, referring to the realities of migrant working-class life.

Within this borderland music, the Tejano genre most fundamentally functioned as a working class dance music using polka beat and rhythms and a characteristic button accordion, bass, drums, and *bajo sexto* guitar. Live performance in local dance halls provided audiences with the core experience, reflecting the mixture of:

1. gendered social segregation between men and women in Mexican American culture,
2. the importance of weekend evenings for heterosexual socialization for both younger and older generations,
3. dance (and drinking) as a physical recreation,
4. the roadhouse dancehall as a gathering place for a predominantly scattered rural population that depends on vehicles for transport, and
5. the creation of musicians who often held down regular weekday jobs and who played professionally on weekends.

Relative to other Mexican musics, Tejano always carried a "low class" orientation in contrast to, say, mariachi music, with its immaculately costumed musicians and "refined" singers. Mexico's natives often looked down on their Tejano cousins for having a corrupted culture and dialect. By the 1980s the Texas variant also had younger musicians and performers like Selena who grew up in urban settings and who were open to rock 'n roll, African American rhythm and blues and funk, Latin American sources, such as the Colombian cumbia, and Anglo pop music influences.

SELENA encapsulates this transformative quality of younger musicians in the Tejano scene by showing young Selena learning to sing in Spanish from her father, dance the cumbia from her mother, and aspiring to sing like Black disco diva Donna Summer. Furthermore, the real-life Selena's actual transit through an

evolving professional music career reveals complexities that the film hides. As a child, singing with her brother, sister, and father under the recirculated name of her father's doo-wop group, Los Dinos (The Guys), Selena sang in English. She had a pop rock repertoire of late 70s hits: the Eagles, the Doobie Brothers, etc. The family then crossed over into the Spanish-language Tejano touring performance market when she was 14. The new Selena y Los Dinos also recorded on independent Texas labels. Finally, billed as just Selena, the star began to cross over into the larger Mexican American market. But, most significantly, her real success in the expanded area depended on her gaining commercial success in Mexico (represented in the film with her Monterrey concert). The music industry's rule of thumb is ironic: success in the general Mexican American market must be preceded by acceptance in Mexico.[4]

Understanding the pattern of Selena's success thus involves recognizing the distinct national/ regional differences between Tejanos and Mexicans. Mexican tastemakers such as DJs and journalists tend to look down on Tejano Spanish pronunciation and Spanglish idioms, as well as faulting the lack of "true" Mexican culture in their Texas cousins. In the film, this is dramatized in a famous incident in the Selena legend, where she had to appear before the press in Monterrey, Mexico. Aware of her faltering Spanish, she made a initial grand gesture of greeting each journalist personally with a phrase and a hug, before the q and a. Charmed, the journalists forgave her lapses in language.[5]

The regional differences between Tejanos and other Mexican Americans operate in a similarly significant way. Thus while Selena early on attained marketing success and critical acclaim within Tejano circles, the cross over to Mexico also assured success in *Billboard's* "Mexican regional (Mexican-American) charts. At a later stage, with success in those markets, Selena could cross over again, this time to *Billboard's* "Hot Latin" charts and eventually win a Grammy. At the same time, Selena expanded her repertoire of styles to include Afro-Caribbean beat, making music videos that could be played in Latin American, and even a number with the Barrio Boyzz, a Niuyorican group. With this expanded repertoire, the last cross over EMI Latin, her record label, engineered was to the English language pop market, and that was attained only with the release of the *Dreaming of You* CD after her death. Thus she returned to where her father started and where she started — singing English language pop.

These ethnic/ regional/ national/ international spatial and demographic divisions and borders exist historically, socially, and economically. And border crossing takes place not only with musical style, but also with marketing strategy. While the film naturalizes the climb to success, in fact, Selena's career was increasingly managed within the framework of industrial practices.

The business of Tejano dramatically has changed in the past quarter century. CHULAS FRONTERAS shows an older musician who owns a record store and who also operates a makeshift recording studio and presses his own records in a garage in the early 1970s. A decade later, the Univision cable network, one of the principle Spanish language outlets, carried the JOHNNY CANALES SHOW from Selena's

hometown of Corpus Christi. The entrepreneur-showman Canale featured Tejano acts videotaped in his club, and through tv, carried the music to a national "Latin" audience. Selena appeared frequently on the show which took her electronically much further than the family's live performance in Texas venues allowed. In part, Tejano music was able to hold onto its identity because a very large number of South Texas radio stations were locally owned. However in the 90s with changes in communications regulations, independent local stations were (and still are) bought up at a rapid rate by radio chains which generated local playlists from a central headquarters with an eye to the national charts and thus pushing a more pan-Latino and pop-oriented style. Thus in 25 years, the local and regional was increasingly subsumed under the national and global.

Tejano music has the ability to mutate and change, both its strength and a symbolic form of ethnic transformation embodied in the concept of crossover.[6] In the film, the first crossover takes place within the Tex-Mex community, dramatized by having two low rider *cholos* recognize and adore "Say-lee-nas." [7] The next step is Selena's topping the Tejano charts through radio and recorded music, transcending the traditional limits of Tejano live performance. When Selena hits number one with "Como La Flor," she is also poised to move beyond Texas to the entire Southwest, and also to crossover into Mexico.

In the film, Tejano music's commercial, technological, and social change is portrayed largely within the framework of family. But in historical reality, in 1989 and 90 major transnational record companies such as Capitol EMI and Sony were eagerly signing up Tejano acts previously represented by regional independent labels. EMI's José Behar, a Cubano with executive experience in the Hollywood music business, engineered Selena's career after signing her. He believed (and proved) that building her as an international Latin star was key to her successfully crossing back to English popular music. Increasingly her career moved from small venues to large concerts, and most importantly to recorded music — where the big money lies.

## LATINO IDENTITY

Selena's father, a second generation Mexican American, went to a public school in Corpus Christi where children who spoke Spanish were sent to the principal's office for suspension or a beating.[8] That Abraham raised his children speaking only English is understandable. But Selena has to learn to sing in Spanish and later awkwardly speak in Spanish. Her relation to Spanish fluency stands symbolically in relation to a US culture and politics where salsa has surpassed catsup as a condiment, but Proposition 187 and attacks on bilingual education continue to punish ethnic identity.

SELENA mobilizes audience sentiments in a progressive direction against racism and sexism. In the opening flashback, we see the original Los Dinos rejected by an Anglo club owner who refuses to have them play in his segregated club. But in a Tejano roadhouse, Los Dinos cause a small riot when they sing doowop in English to a Tejano audience that wants to dance. The implication of pairing the two events is to indicate the Anglo club owner is racist, but that the Tejano audience is

culturally backward. Later, as a teen performer Selena is underpaid by a Tejano concert promoter who explains that she's "just a woman." But her subsequent superstar status puts a lie to that.

Near the end of the film Selena goes shopping before the Grammy awards ceremony in a large L.A. mall. When she and a friend ask to try on a dress in an expensive boutique, the Anglo saleswoman says they couldn't afford it. But a Chicano stock boy spots the star and word of mouth produces a huge fan rush of Chicano store employees and shoppers, turning the tables on the boutique blondes who don't know who Selena is. Thus triumphs over sexism and racism emerge not from politics but from consumption: equality and democracy are marketplace values.

In one of the film's best moments, Abraham begins an inspired rant about how Mexican Americans have to be more Mexican than Mexicans and more American than Americans. "We've got to know about John Wayne *and* Pedro Infante...Oprah *and* Cristina. American food is too bland and yet when we go to Mexico we get the runs!" Selena responds, "It's a good thing we have *frijoles* and *tortillas* to give us strength for the job ...and *menudo*!" As we see later, Selena actually fortifies herself with a diet of Doritos and pepperoni pizza. She has become assimilated while maintaining a certain Latino identity within U.S. commercial culture: a true Taco Belle.

In the film, after her triumph in Monterey, Mexico, Selena is recognized by the Mexican press as "a genuine artist of the people." Thus in a reversal of the traditional pattern befitting the NAFTA Nineties, mass culture becomes the vehicle for folk culture. Selena confides that performing confirms for her that "my dreams were the same as all those people in the audience." The star who crossed over into success in Mexico becomes the embodiment of the community, of La Raza, and beyond.

SELENA creates an interesting mythology about the performer's success. In the film version, record execs arrive very late in her career. When music industry execs say they want her to produce a crossover album, indicating she could be the "next Gloria Estafan," they ask Abraham, "Is she ready?" "She's ready," he affirms, adding, "We've been ready for a long time." The *we* is significant — it represents the family, the Tejano music industry, the Tejano community, and in the fullest sense all Mexican-Americans and even all Latinos. Instead of assimilation as the erasure of ethnic identity, something the family already achieved in Lake Jackson, the mainstream becomes transformed to accept Tejano, to accept a female performer, to celebrate diversity without erasing identity.

In a brilliant article on changing Latina identities, "Jennifer's Butt," Frances Negrón-Muntaner considers Selena in relation to the body of Jennifer Lopez, the film's star, a Niuyorican. Among other points, the essay argues that Lopez, like Selena, presents a distinctively "curvy" body :

"In gendered terms, the big rear end acts both as an identification site for Latinas to reclaim their beauty and a 'compensatory fantasy' for a

whole community." [9]

Thus ethnic identity is expressed corporeally:

"While it is arguable that a Latino identity 'exists' as a cultural formation across the United States, and that this identity has erased or displaced nationalist investments, it is also undeniable that for those born and raised in major urban spaces with significant and diverse 'Latino' communities, the construct, although not exhausting our complexity, has constitutive materiality .... In [her] marketing and audience-building trajectory, Selena went from being a Tejana (a territorialized 'regional' identity) to being a Latina (an 'ethnic minority'). 'Latino,' in this case, does not refer to a cultural identity, but to a specifically American national currency for economic and political deal making: a technology to demand and deliver emotions, votes, markets, and resources on the same level as other racialized minorities." (183-84)

Dramatizing the point, Negrón-Muntaner discusses an episode of the Univision talk show, *Cristina*:

"As in other talk shows during the promotion of SELENA, there came a moment during the interview when the question had to be posed to Jennifer Lopez: '¿Todo eso es tuyo?' (Is that body for real?) In other words, is that big butt yours or is it prosthetic? Although a fair question for many Hollywood actresses' faces and breasts, Jennifer Lopez smiled as if she had been waiting a long time for this moment. She stood up, gave a 360 degree turn, patted her butt, and triumphantly sat down: 'Todo es mio.' It's all mine." (186)

The assertion of identify within diversity-this is the central fantasy of SELENA-the performer, the star, the celebrity, the movie. The movie omits it, but the real Selena had already achieved this status in a commercial way: she was the sole Latin celebrity endorser for Coca Cola in the U.S. Latino and Mexico markets: Siempre Selena! Siempre Coca-Cola! (And in the past year, Jennifer Lopez has been appointed the new Coke Latina star, with commercials remarkably similar to Selena's.) Regionalism thus has its place within the New World Order — but the vehicle requires success within the capitalist system. Further, it consists of fitting identity to the market, but the market itself consists of a sector which appeals, through the flexibility of youth, to a Pan-Latino identity that mixes nationalities, cultural traditions, degrees of assimilation and acculturation.

The contradictions of identity within US and transnational culture are fundamental cultural *and* economic ones. The latter term — economic contradiction — provides the film's signifying absence — that which the film cannot speak in either Spanish or English. At the time of her murder, Selena was breaking further away from her father's control of the music end of the family business. She insisted on her own autonomy as a businesswoman in running her boutiques and clothing design operation. She aspired to own a factory manufacturing clothing in Monterey. With



the open door of NAFTA, had she lived longer, she might not only have become the first big Tejano crossover star, but also the first Latina Kathy Lee Gifford.

## NOTES

An earlier version of this essay was commissioned for the 1998 Chicago Latino Cinema Film Festival catalogue. I want to thank Professor Isidro Lucas for that opportunity. My revisions benefited from comments by members of a workshop at the 1998 Chicago Latino Film Festival, and discussions with Tim Anderson, Amy Beer, Ilene Goldman, John Hess, Julia Lesage, Chris List, and Chon Noriega.

1. My central text here is the Hollywood film, but inevitably and especially because of the close proximity of the star's early death (March 1995) to the release of the film (March 1997) and the fact that she was a rising star whose star image and myth were still being created, this is also about the media-created Selena text, the various "authorized" versions of her life such as the Quintanilla family authorized documentary *Selena Remembered* (d. Cecilia Miniuchhi, narrated by Edward James Olmos, who plays her father in the biopic), the legends and facts (particularly as documented on the major Selena website —

<[www.ondanet.com:1995/tejano/selenanews.html](http://www.ondanet.com:1995/tejano/selenanews.html)>.

This site has links to other significant Selena sites. It would also be possible, following the recent stretching of the boundaries of documentary, to read the film *SELENA* as a dramatized documentary, though I find the biopic model more interesting and productive. George F. Custen's *Bio/pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers UP, 1992) provides an excellent overview of the genre. My central reference point for the facts of her life is the unauthorized biography *Selena: Como la Flor* by Joe Nick Patoski (NY: Boulevard, 1996/7), a journalist who wrote about Selena before and after her death.

2. A description of *CHULAS FRONTERAS* (Pretty Borders) can be found in Sharon R. Sherman's *Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video, and Culture* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1998).

3. The Robert Young film *THE BALLAD OF GREGORIO CORTEZ* (1983) depicts the story of a famous Tejano corrido. The narratives of resistance to Anglo authority continue today in controversial "narcocorridos" which celebrate drug running.

4. An analysis of Selena written after her death but before the movie considers her star image in terms of cross over and borderlands: Ramona Lierra-Schwichtenberg, "Crossing Over: Selena's Tejano Music and the Discourse of Borderlands," *Mapping the Beat: Popular Music and Contemporary Theory*, ed. Thomas Swiss, John Sloop, and Andrew Herman (Malden MA: Blackwell, 1998) 205-218.

5. The individual greeting to all present is required in all social gatherings in the extended family in Latin America. Selena treated the journalists like a good kid greeting all the older relatives — showing she knows the rules of Latin courtesy—which many second and third generation Mexican American kids might forget.



6. Most Mexican American format radio stations traditionally hired Mexican nationals as DJs, programmers, and announcers who were thought to pronounce "proper" Spanish as opposed to Tejano Spanish. In particular, the Los Angeles market was impossible to enter without validation first in Mexico, reflecting the importance of Spanish language radio and TV for the first generation arrivals. Selena achieved touring, recording, and radio success in Texas, and the Tejano diaspora in New Mexico, Arizona, Washington state, Illinois, Indiana, and even Cubano Florida before the crossover to Mexico.

7. In the film she and her family pronounce the same "Seh-lee-na" which is an English variant on the Spanish pronunciation of "Sah-lay-na." Her family nickname was "Sel."

8. Abraham Sr., the first generation arrival, was a devout Jehovah's Witness. Abraham Jr. and his children were not full members of the church, but followed its theology, a point missed by many commentators who assume the family was Roman Catholic. In many ways the Jehovah's Witness church is quite conservative-it does not permit even square dancing, and proscribes Christmas carols-so Selena's professional work probably would not be an acceptable activity.

9. Frances Negron-Muntaner, "Jennifer's Butt," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 22:2 (fall 1997) 192